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ABSTRACT

The anthropologist sees specific human non-verbal behavior as the medium through which relationships are maintained, regulated, and guided within culturally prescribed patterns. The spoken language, the use of space, eye-contact, smiling, and the use of the hand constitute unique patterns of behavior that are culturally specific and have wide variations cross-culturally. Cross cultural interferences in communication are largely the result of mistaken assignment of meaning. Some of the most perplexing cross cultural misunderstandings can occur when two people's patterns exhibit highly overt similarity and in fact have a significant number of identical forms and associated meanings, yet differ on more subtle levels. Included in the educational implications of cross cultural non-verbal problems is the level of detail that is required for the study of children from distinct cultures in different contexts. When considering what can be done for the urban classroom teacher, some of the answers may lie in equipping them with knowledge about the children's culture and with empathy. It is also important that teachers attempt to make up for gaps in knowledge by developing an open sensitive mind that actively impedes the formation of ethnocentric value judgments. (Author/AM)

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Nonverbal Behavior, Cross-Cultural Contact, and the Urban Classroom Teacher

by Cornelius Lee Grove

Sometimes in the mornings I listen to a short radio commentary entitled "The Culture Scene" during which local events in theater, music, dance, art, and so forth are announced and reviewed. That title distresses me. It is just one more reason why the man-in-the-street can maintain the notion that "culture" refers merely to the artifacts and mentifacts of human existence. The real stuff of culture consists of the intangible and out-of-awareness differences in the ways people from different regions or backgrounds think, feel, and behave in human interactions. Cross-cultural researchers are adding continually to the existing stock of knowledge about these countless variations, so that now those familiar with the literature are discussing not only dissimilarities in kinship systems and sexual mores, but also deeper and more complex matters such as conceptual styles and nonverbal communication.

There are few institutions where more intense and repeated face-to-face interaction among culturally different individuals occurs than in the schools of urban America. It is the teachers, counselors, and administrators who run the schools who must take responsibility for making the personal adjustments required to compensate for cultural diversity in the classroom. The day of forcing the immigrant or minority student to make all the changes is over. But goodwill and commitment on the part of school personnel needs to be set in a foundation of knowledge and empathy. Here is where scholarly research into cross-cultural problems finds its ultimate value.

Human Nonverbal Behavior

It was only in the early 1950s that a significant number of communications researchers freed themselves from the long preoccupation with the content and form of speech and turned their attention to other channels of communication. These theorists did not necessarily stop listening; they did concentrate, however, on *watching*. As time went on, they brought sophisticated filming methods into their effort. Gestures received much attention from the beginning, but soon research interests broadened to encompass virtually every behavior used by humans in face-to-face interaction: postural configurations, touching patterns, general styles and rhythms in movement, the apportioning and use of space, facial expressions, eye movements, dress and self-decoration, physiological states (for example, blushing), the use and segmentation of time, and even the use of the olfactory sense. Human speech was never simply ignored by the nonverbal researchers. In the first place, the interrelationship between verbal and nonverbal patterns was of primary theoretical interest for some. Second, it was soon realized that the model developed by the linguists (morphology, syntax, grammar, etc.) was highly applicable to the understanding and description of nonverbal behaviors. Finally, what gap was left between verbal and nonverbal studies was bridged by those interested in paralinguistics, that is, in human *vocal* behavior (pitch, intensity, rhythm, articulation, resonance, and so forth, in speaking, and all nonverbal sounds such as sighing, laughing, coughing).

Research efforts continue today. Although nonverbal research still cannot equal linguistic research in generating armies of devoted young scholars or donations from foundations and governmental agencies, it continues to grow steadily, in part as the result of its popularization by Julius Fast (*Body Language*, 1970) and others. Unfortunately, the popular accounts have linked nonverbal communication too closely with sex (which may of course explain their popularity). From a scholarly point of view, what function does nonverbal communication (behavior) serve? Communication theorists might argue that it's just another method of sending and receiving messages, but such simplistic notions are no longer given much weight. From the psychological viewpoint (in which the focus of attention is the individual) nonverbal behavior expresses affective states. But from the most recent, anthropological viewpoint (in which the focus of attention is on interaction within groups), *nonverbal communication is the medium through which relationships are maintained, regulated, and guided within culturally-prescribed patterns.* The anthropologist sees specific nonverbal behaviors as the means whereby humans exchange covert information about the state of their relationships so that those

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relationships can proceed smoothly or undergo alteration—so that, in turn, the actors can remain predictable to one another. (Note that "proceed smoothly" does not necessarily mean "proceed sweetly." An argument can proceed smoothly; it can even escalate to blows smoothly.) In other words, within each culture there are certain prescribed nonverbal patterns of behavior for those who are falling in love, for those who are discussing business, for those who are briefly interacting as strangers, for those who are arguing, and so forth. Changes in nonverbal patterns signal changes in the state of the relationship or otherwise qualify its ongoing nature. Such signals, being on an out-of-awareness level, are understood intuitively. People who are particularly adept at receiving and reacting to these signals are said to be "sensitive" by their acquaintances. The key point for our purposes is that these metacommunicative,* adumbrative patterns of behavior are culturally specific; over the centuries, each society has developed not only unique verbal forms, but also unique nonverbal forms of communication.

A Few Examples of Nonverbal Miscommunication

Nonverbal research has not characteristically taken place in schools and classrooms, and it has proved quite difficult for me to find examples which not only would give all readers a feeling for the *kinds* of problems which can arise in cross-cultural contact, but also would be immediately relevant to the daily concerns of urban classroom teachers. The following examples seem to fulfill both objectives.

Let us first examine a nonverbal misunderstanding in cross-cultural interaction that lies within the realm of spoken language. Clifford Hill of Teachers College has been carrying out an empirical study of the linguistic description of spatial relations by bilingual students in Niamey, Niger. He has discovered that native speakers of French (such as some of the students' teachers) typically assume that any object without an intrinsic front and back (for example, a solid colored ball) is facing toward the person perceiving it, while native speakers of Hausa or Djerma who have had no Western education typically assume that such an object is facing in the same direction as the person perceiving it. Thus, when requested to touch the *back* of the ball, the French speaker responds by touching the far side, while the native of Niger touches the near side. Hill's research findings give us no reason to expect that Nigerians schooled in the French language automatically reverse their indigenous assumption regarding the meaning of "front" and "back." (Hill, "Sex-Based Differences in Cognitive Processing of Spatial Relations in Bilingual Students in Niger," in *Patterns of Language, Culture, and Society: Sub-Saharan Africa. Ohio State University Working Papers in Linguistics*, Vol. 19, 1975, pp. 185-198.)

Dr. Orlando Taylor of the Center for Applied Linguistics recently completed a study of cross-cultural difficulties dividing black and white soldiers in the U.S. Army. One group of findings concerned the resentment of blacks over some of the touching behaviors of whites. For example, many blacks apparently are sensitive about having their hair touched or patted, even by other blacks; but whites who mean to communicate friendliness often engage in this action. Whites who are feeling positive about a black acquaintance may impulsively throw an arm around the black's shoulder (just as they would do in the case of a liked white); the blacks, however, feel that this action is patronizing and demeaning. Another finding was that blacks resent white attempts to "give skin" (slap palms stylistically); here again, the whites apparently do this in order to communicate interest in or approval of their black comrades' cultural styles, but the blacks see the action as a parody of their own behavior and as an unwarranted intrusion into an in-group nonverbal pattern by outsiders. Finally, blacks may feel angered when they reach out to touch a white (as in moving in to shake hands) and the white takes a step backwards, while permitting the contact. For the white, the backward step may relate to his conception of the boundaries of personal space; another white who moved in equally close would be stepped back from equally far. But the black may interpret the backward step as a nonverbal expression of racial intolerance, perhaps even believing that the white is acting in the expectation that the black will smell bad. (Personal communication from Dr. Taylor; the study is not yet available to the general public.)

Eye-contact behaviors have wide variations cross-culturally. One of the most frequently quoted differences involves the Hispanic and American conceptions of the proper use of the eyes by a child or subordinate who is being reprimanded. American children are expected to demonstrate their respect for the disciplinarian by looking her or him in the eye; within many Hispanic cultures the same attitude is communicated by the child's staring at the floor. Countless classroom misunderstandings must have resulted from this disparity, for white teachers tend to interpret the Hispanic child's nonverbal response as a subtle insult added to the original infraction. With regard to the use of the eyes during face-to-face conversation, the patterns of mainstream white Americans fall somewhere between those of the Arabs (who tend to maintain intense eyeball-to-eyeball stares) and those of many blacks (who generally avoid looking at the face of their interlocutor, especially when the other is a superior). Some theorists have suggested that the old notion of many whites that blacks are shiftless and timid may have arisen because the culturally mandated eye behavior of the blacks was being interpreted by whites in terms of the whites' own culture-specific expectations. Blacks, on the other hand, have been prone to interpret the faceward gaze of conversing whites as a deliberate attempt at dominance. (Kenneth R. Johnson, "Black Kinesics: Some Non-verbal Communication Patterns in the Black Culture," in *Florida F L Reporter*, Vol. 9, 1971, pp. 17-20, 57.)

Smiling has provoked much controversy between researchers who believe it to be a universal gesture and those who see it as culturally specific. Leaving aside esoteric theoretical questions, we can say at least that the *context* appropriate for smiling varies cross-culturally. For the Japanese, smiling is a law of etiquette; consequently, smiles tend to be maintained in contexts and for durations felt by American whites to be highly suspect or downright inappropriate. I myself have felt compelled to check

* Metacommunicative: communicative about the quality or intent of another channel of communication. Words, tone of voice, and eye behavior are examples of channels of communication. A certain tone of voice used to indicate that spoken words are meant sarcastically is *metacommunicative*. A wink used to indicate that the sarcastic tone of voice is not meant too critically is *metametacommunicative*. The wink itself might be qualified by simultaneous action in another channel, such as gesture or posture. Although these levels of qualification are difficult to analyze, individuals from the same cultural background intuitively understand one another even though each employs many channels to simultaneously qualify each other.

my fly and examine other features of my appearance after giving directions to a Japanese tourist in New York. (Weston LaBarre, "The Cultural Basis of Emotions and Gestures," *Journal of Personality*, 1947.)

We have noted earlier a cross-cultural difference in the use of space with regard to blacks and whites. The classic example of dissimilarities in this realm involves the conception of what is normal conversational distance by North and South Americans. Our Latin neighbors generally stand much closer to one another than we do when talking. Consequently, it is possible to observe a kind of "spatial dance" in encounters between Yankees and Latins – the Yankee keeps moving backward while the Latin keeps closing in. Their movements about the room may appear amusing to the observer, but the feelings of the actors themselves about each other may be growing increasingly negative. The Yankee may leave the encounter assuming that the Latin is pushy or even sexually motivated, while the Latin may exit distressed about the cold and distant manner of his Northern friend. But dissimilarities in the use of space are not confined to interaction during stand-up conversations; the way in which furniture is arranged and used in a room may also lie at the base of cross-cultural problems. For example, it was found in Israel that the childrenof Oriental Jews from the Middle East and Northern Africa were often failing in school, while the children of Western Jews were usually having few academic problems. Researcher Melvin Alexenberg discovered, among other things, that the physical arrangement of Israeli classrooms was conducive to "frontal lessons" of the kind so common in American schools. Oriental Jews, not only in schools but also in places of worship and in the home, are unaccustomed to this pattern, preferring instead seating-in-the-round. In seeking to lessen the problems of the Oriental children while not prejudicing the chances of the Westerners, he experimented successfully with, among other things, an open classroom approach. (Melvin Alexenberg, "Toward an Integral Structure Through Science and Art," in *Main Currents in Modern Thought*, Vol. 30, No. 4, 1974, pp. 146-152.)

Finally, as an example of subtle differences in the use of gestures cross-culturally, let us note that among certain Spanish-speaking peoples, one must use the hand in quite specific ways when indicating the height of living beings. Holding the hand vertically (thumb up) at the appropriate distance above the ground is appropriate for humans, while holding the hand horizontally (as most Americans would normally do) is appropriate only for animals. To hold the hand horizontally while illustrating the height of a human being would be to make an uncomplimentary nonverbal statement about that person! (Mari-Luci Jaramillo, "Cultural Differences Revealed Through Language," in *NCRIEEO Tipsheet No. 8*, Teachers College, Columbia University, May 1[illegible].)

At the Heart of Nonverbal Miscommunication

Cross-cultural interferences in communication of the kinds described above are largely the result of *mistaken assignment of meaning*. Virtually everything that people do has meaning; we do not need to analyze consciously each of the nonverbal acts of those around us to determine its specific meaning, however, because human actions are not isolated and idiosyncratic but rather patterned and repeated within appropriate social contexts. The patterned nature of human behavior makes the meanings of vast numbers of nonverbal communications so well known to us, so predictable, that they no longer require our conscious attention. This is why both the patterns of performance and the patterns of associated meaning have been described by several researchers as existing in "out-of-awareness." The out-of-awareness nature of most nonverbal communicative behaviors lies at the heart of countless cross-cultural misunderstandings. Most people do not know the meanings of patterns different from theirs, do not notice when different patterns are being performed, and do not even know that people from different areas of the world communicate nonverbally in different ways. An additional problem occurs, of course, when a pattern of nonverbal behavior has an identical or highly similar *physical* form but different associated meanings for individuals from different cultures. Thus, when members of two social groups previously separated by an ocean, a mountain, or a railroad track meet face-to-face, each person implicitly expects those of the other group to conform to those behavioral patterns and uniformities with which he or she has been familiar. Those actions and behaviors which bear little or no resemblance to familiar ones will either be noticed and queried or – perhaps more likely – missed altogether. Those actions and behaviors which bear a reasonable resemblance to those of his or her own group will be assigned meaning *as though they were being performed by members of his or her own group*. This is an understandable mistake. One cannot be expected to know all the subtleties of all the world's cultures. It is no surprise that mistaken meanings are assigned, nor that the resulting confusion, antagonism, and anger may run its course without anyone's being able to pinpoint the true cause. Not that the actors fail to discover a cause – we are obsessed with cause and effect in the West, and we will decide upon a cause. Unfortunately, we characteristically conclude that some form of individually-motivated bad faith generated the problem.

Note, by the way, that some of the most perplexing cross-cultural misunderstandings may occur when two people's patterns exhibit highly overt similarity and in fact have a significant number of identical forms and associated meanings. The inevitable differences (however few) in these cases usually occur on more subtle levels and are longer in surfacing, giving an opportunity for warm interpersonal relationships to be formed before the first undercurrents of misunderstanding are set in motion.

What Can Be Done for the Classroom Teacher?

In considering what can be done for the urban classroom teacher, we must first of all remember that nonverbal research is still in its childhood, and that its growth is slow due to the vastly greater attention received by its older sibling, linguistic research. When

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we look at the state of affairs in *cross-cultural* nonverbal research, we find a veritable infant; when we look at the state of our knowledge about the *educational implications* of cross-cultural nonverbal problems, we find ourselves barely out of the delivery room! Furthermore, what we need to know is vast because of the level of detail required. Children from distinct cultures must be studied in specific contexts. One cannot, for example, study the nonverbal patterns of Spanish-speakers; one must study the nonverbal patterns of Puerto Ricans, of Cubans, of Colombians, and so forth. Furthermore, the conclusions of a study of Cuban-white interaction in a Florida classroom will not be perfectly applicable to Cuban-white interaction in a New York classroom. On the basis of the research that has been done to date, we can do little more than intelligently discuss the *nature* of the problem.

Let us suppose for the sake of discussion that we did know many details about sources of nonverbal interference with communication in a vast range of bicultural situations. Suppose furthermore that we had the finances and the trained staff necessary to carry out the work of retraining all teachers who operate within culturally plural classrooms. How should we proceed? My question is less concerned with questions of methodology (lectures? workshops? encounter groups?) than with questions about what we are going to expect of those trained teachers when they return to their bicultural classrooms. No doubt we would be justified in expecting a non-Hispanic teacher, for example, to hold her hand vertically, with thumb up, when indicating the height of a human being while in conversation with a Hispanic child or parent. But I would draw the line somewhere between that and this: expecting a non-Arab teacher in conversation with an Arab student or parent to hold her face so close to that of her interlocutor that each continually smells the other's breath. I believe that there is a danger that intellect-based attempts to conform to a strange cultural pattern will tend to appear calculated and affected to the person on the receiving end of the behavior. No one learns his deep cultural patterns in a classroom nor in a semester's time. Out-of-awareness behavioral patterns are virtually impossible to change as an act of will because they are so interrelated and sensitive to subtle features in the social context that one can learn them only through long residence within a given culture – preferably as an infant and child. Consequently, it is unrealistic to expect teachers to alter significantly their basic cultural assumptions and patterns of behavior.

I believe that the answer lies in equipping classroom teachers with knowledge, and with empathy. Knowledge should enable the teacher to predict what to expect from her culturally different students, to interpret correctly the meanings of nonverbal behaviors, and to avoid overt nonverbal actions that would be misinterpreted by her students. Thus, the teacher of Hispanics will not be angered by the floorward stare of the student she is disciplining. The teacher of blacks will think twice about "giving skin" in greeting his students. The teacher of Arabs will be sensitive to classroom seating arrangements. In other words knowledge should enable the teacher to avoid making mistaken judgments as well as to avoid performing overt behaviors that could themselves communicate mistaken impressions.

I have also called for equipping teachers with empathy. I believe this is necessary because it will be a very long time before researchers can tell us everything we need to know, and because it is unreasonable to expect teachers to prepare themselves for every eventuality. Consequently, it is important that teachers attempt to make up for the inevitable gaps of knowledge by developing an open, sensitive, flexible, and accepting state of mind – a state of mind that actively impedes the formation of ethnocentric value judgments. Empathy is grounded in knowledge. But it goes beyond the limits of what is known, and it cannot be generated by knowledge alone. What we need to know is how to assist human beings to achieve empathy with culturally-different others. Perhaps this should be our top research priority.

A Research Post Script

The earliest intensive inquiry into nonverbal behavior was carried out by none other than Charles Darwin, who in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872, republished 1965) discussed and illustrated the bodily actions and appearances that accompany a wide range of affective states. Little systematic work was done between then and 1941, when David Efron completed a Ph.D. thesis at Columbia University in which he studied the changes over time in the gestural patterns of Eastern Jewish and Southern Italian immigrants to the United States; this work has since been published as *Gesture and Environment*. Another contribution prior to the 1950s was an article by Weston LaBarre entitled "The Cultural Basis of Emotions and Gestures" (*Journal of Personality*, 1947).

After the early Fifties, it becomes increasingly more difficult to single out the leading researchers. There is little doubt, however, that the movement owes much to the pioneering – and still continuing – efforts of Ray L. Birdwhistell. In 1952 Birdwhistell published *Introduction to Kinesics*, the first of numerous books and articles. Some of his best contributions are collected in a currently available paperback, *Kinesics and Context* (1970). An early publication dealing with both basic principles and practical applications is that of Jurgen Ruesch and Weldon Kees, *Nonverbal Communication* (1956); it still merits attention. Major contributions, especially to the study of proxemics (the use of space and distance), have been made by the anthropologist Edward T. Hall; see in particular *The Hidden Dimension* (1966). Hall joined with William Foote White in 1960 to write a short article which is an excellent introduction to the range of cross-cultural differences

Continued next page

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in nonverbal communication: "Intercultural Communications: A Guide to Men of Action" (*Human Organization,* Spring 1960). Detailed studies of nonverbal behavior of the face have been carried out by Paul Ekman and his associates; see, for example, *Emotion in the Human Face* (1971), which discusses facial expression in cross-cultural perspective. Others such as Ralph Exline and Eckhard Hess have focused research solely on the eyes. In the field of paralinguistics, a cross-cultural approach characterizes the outstanding book by Mary Ritchie Key, *Paralanguage and Kinesics* (1975), and Alan Lomax and the staff of the Cantometrics Project at Columbia University have made important contributions to cross-cultural studies in *Folk Song Style and Culture* (1968). The anthropological view of human communication is well presented in recent works by Albert E. Scheflen: *Body Language and Social Order* (1972) and *How Behavior Means* (1974). The works of Erving Goffman continue to be of value to all who are interested in human nonverbal behavior; see, for example, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (1956) and *Behavior in Public Places* (1963). Finally, let us note that some of the most recent and esoteric work in cross-cultural differences in nonverbal behavior – human interaction problems due to differences in biological rhythms – has been explicitly related to misunderstandings in the classroom by Paul and Happie Byers; see "Dimensions of Nonverbal Communication" in Charlotte B. Winsor, ed., *Dimensions of Language Experience,* 1975.

This necessarily brief review of the literature has unfairly ignored dozens of dedicated researchers. The reader is referred to the extensive bibliographies included in Mark L. Knapp's *Nonverbal Communication in Human Interaction* (1972), which also is a good introductory text. Teachers who would like to discuss nonverbal communication with classes at the secondary or junior college level are referred to the very useful text by Louis Forsdale, *Nonverbal Communication* (part of the "Making Contact" series published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich in 1974).

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